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child first: a belief, an attitude, and a path to change

By Jane Mulholland

Child First: Two small words that can change a life, a family, a school, a state, a country. Washington School for the Deaf (WSD), in Vancouver, and the Washington State Center for Childhood Deafness and Hearing Loss (CDHL), have committed to supporting Child First, a national campaign to ensure that deaf children have their right to language recognized and fulfilled regardless of which educational method specified in the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Initiated by the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD) and endorsed by the National Association of the Deaf, the campaign (www.ceasd.org/ideal/) attempts to relegate what some called the sign/speech “communication wars” to the dustbin of history.

Child First is modality neutral. Whether the child’s family embraces American Sign Language (ASL), listening, speechreading or speech, a system of signs that encode English, or a combination of approaches, Child First supports the child and his or her family. At Child First, the child’s human right to language is primary, but the chosen method of learning and exploring that language is based on the child’s needs and the decision of the parents and the IEP team.

Developed initially to help federal lawmakers understand the unique educational needs of deaf and hard of hearing children and to inform the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Child First

Photos courtesy of Jane Mulholland



recognizes the following the principles:

- Language is a human right.
- There are multiple pathways to learning language.
- One size—or one system—does not fit all learners.
- The IEP should determine educational placement for each child.
- Monitoring each child's progress is critical to appropriate educational outcomes.
- Family involvement is critical to a child's success.

I initially learned about Child First from CEASD. As a longtime member, I have always found the technical assistance papers and other resources provided by this organization to be very helpful so when CEASD began talking about the Child First campaign, I watched the vlogs by CEASD president Dr. Ron Stern, superintendent of the New Mexico School for the Deaf, and read the information on the CEASD website. “I hope there is a ground swell of support for this campaign,” I thought. “It is exactly what we need to ensure deaf and hard of hearing children in this country get the services they need and deserve.” Then I went back to my everyday work and promptly forgot about it.

However, in April of 2012, Rick Hauan, director of CDHL, and I attended the CEASD conference in Connecticut and we were energized to find that much of the conference focused on Child First. Rick and I talked about how exciting

it would be to bring this campaign into our school, WSD, and what Child First could mean for the children of Washington State.

WSD is a state-funded residential school. From its inception in 1886, WSD has provided a comprehensive, high quality, 24-hour educational program for deaf and hard of hearing students from across Washington State. Until 2009, WSD was an independent facility; however in 2009, the Washington legislature, by a unanimous vote, created a new agency—CDHL—as a statewide resource to provide leadership and coordination for WSD and all school districts serving deaf and hard of hearing students in our state. CDHL developed a statewide outreach team of 36 representatives from WSD and school districts and private schools throughout the state, the state department of education, parent organizations, and the Gallaudet University Regional Center at Ohlone College (in Fremont, California). The goal was the provision of technical assistance, consultation, training, and in some cases direct services throughout Washington State.

While the environment of WSD is bilingual in ASL and English, CDHL works with programs and schools that follow other communication philosophies, including those that use the listening and spoken language approach. CDHL outreach team members provide support to all. Within the team, every modality and communication method is accepted, and team members learn from each other as they collaborate to support programs and school districts throughout the state.

As we worked to bring Child First to our state, we first



made a presentation to the CDHL Board of Trustees in November of 2012. The board enthusiastically supported the principles and goals of Child First and voted to formally endorse the campaign. Nine board members and eight staff became supporters that day. Next we began a series of presentations to the WSD leadership team and various departments within WSD. These are still underway, but by the end of that effort, more than 150 people will have heard the Child First message, bringing the total number of potential supporters to 170.

In January of 2013, the CDHL statewide outreach team held its quarterly meeting, and time was allotted on the agenda for a Child First presentation. At the conclusion, another 36 people had learned about the campaign, pushing the number of potential supporters to well over 200. More important, the network this group of people represents and the impact these 36 people can have in sharing the Child First principles throughout the state is enormous. The members of the outreach team interact with the state's nine educational service districts—potentially 295 school districts, private schools, and various agencies. We are beginning to explore how each of the team members can carry the message of Child First into their corners of the state. As of this time, presentations have been made with staff from the Department of Health, the Department of Early Learning, the Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the Washington Sensory Disability Services. We are hoping that the number of people who receive the Child First message in Washington may reach the thousands within the next year.

As a Child First state, Washington would provide our deaf and

hard of hearing children with IEPs based on the needs identified in their evaluations, not on the services a particular program offers. We would see deaf and hard of hearing children's educational progress continually monitored and appropriate interventions, supports, and changes in placement provided so the children are not allowed to fail.

We would see deaf and hard of hearing children become emotionally and socially healthy young adults, capable of

accomplishing their personal and professional goals. We would see parents of deaf and hard of hearing children receive unbiased information, training, and support throughout the lives of their children so they can make the decisions that are best for their families. We would also see deaf and hard of hearing children having the same opportunities, the same entitlements, the same basic human rights our society takes for granted for hearing children. Finally, we would see deaf and hard of hearing children become adults that take their rightful place in every field of

work, every level of government, every community organization, every opportunity afforded to citizens in our country.

The Child First campaign is about the power of keeping the concept of the *individual* in the IEP process. It is about having the individual child in the forefront of every decision we make and about every individual that reads this article having the power to impact 10; 20; 1,000 or more people by sharing the principles of Child First. Share them with your family, your colleagues, your school districts, and your legislators at the state and

national levels. Believe that you—one individual—have the power to make a difference in the lives of the children you serve.

When we left the CEASD conference last year, Rick and I had the goal of WSD becoming a Child First school. Once we started focusing on that, our goal changed to having CDHL become a Child First agency. Now we will not be satisfied until we are a Child First state. The beneficiaries will be every deaf and hard of hearing child and their families in Washington.

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